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AUTHOR Savage, Grant T.
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ABSTRACT

Habermas's theory of dialogue was used to evaluate the process of decision making that occurred in a labor-management committee's meeting to discuss flextime. The study attempted to determine why, at that meeting, the committee's consensus process of decision making failed. W.R. Bion's theory of unconscious group motives was also used to supplement the analysis and provided a basis for concluding that the committee was motivated by the unconscious desire to fight or flee from its responsibilities. It was only after the committee had reflected upon its actions--a move brought about because one member publicly questioned its motives--that it was able to reach a "true" consensus. The findings imply that the process of group discussion is perhaps the most significant factor that should be considered when either evaluating or intervening in labor-management committee decision making. Moreover, structures within labor-management programs that establish and maintain an "ideal speech situation" during committee meetings are necessary to ensure consensus decisions. (FL)

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WHEN CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING FAILS: A CASE STUDY

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Grant T. Savage
Area of Management
College of Business Administration
Texas Tech University
Box 4320
Lubbock, TX 79409

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Abstract

This paper examines the history of a labor-management committee's discussion of flextime to explain why the committee's process of consensus decision-making seemingly failed during one meeting. Habermas' (1979) theory of dialogue (cf Savage, 1983) is used to evaluate the process of decision-making during this meeting. Bion's (1961) theory of unconscious group motives ("basic assumptions") supplements this analysis, and it provides a basis for concluding that the committee was motivated by the unconscious desire to fight or flee from its responsibilities. Only after the committee had reflected upon its actions--since its motives were publically questioned by a committee member--was it able to reach a "true" consensus.

The paper implies that the process of group discussion is perhaps the most significant factor that should be considered either when evaluating or intervening in labor-management committee decision-making. Moreover, structures within labor-management programs that establish and maintain an "ideal speech situation" during committee meetings are necessary to ensure consensus decisions.

WHEN CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING FAILS: A CASE STUDY

Background

This paper examines the decision-making that occurred in a Quality of Working Life (QWL) worksite committee (the DR committee). This committee is one of many committees within a QWL program which is supported by a large mid-western city and a labor union local. I served as a third-party facilitator for the QWL program, and the DR committee was one of five worksite committees that I visited on a regular basis.

The QWL Program's Committee-Based Structure

Compared to the city's organization, the QWL program offers an alternate but parallel structure of four levels of committees: (1) a city-wide committee, (2) a department-wide committee, (3) a number of division-wide committees, and (4) many work-site committees. While the structure of the QWL program parallels the hierarchial structure of the city administration, the locus of control is decentralized. The worksite committees are empowered to make decisions that directly effect their working conditions, but they can not violate city-, departmental-, or division-wide rules. However, a worksite committee can suggest experiments to the higher level QWL committees so that changes in rules can be tried on a trial basis. In short, the QWL program provides lines of communication between city employees and managers that would not ordinarily exist. This enhanced communication occurs because of the make-up of the committees.

Worksite committees consist of both fixed (for key management and union roles) and elected positions (for supervisory and non-supervisory employees). The fixed positions are seats on the committee for people who occupy certain management and union roles. Generally, the worksite manager and assistant manager have fixed positions, as do the union steward and a designated union assistant. The elected positions are more variable in nature: each committee

sets up guidelines for elections and determines what form of representation of the workforce should occur in the committee.

The division-level QWL committees include fixed (the worksite manager and the union steward) and elected representatives (generally the chair of the committee) from the worksite committees as well as the superintendent of the division. Representatives elected from the division-level committees sit on the department-level committee which includes the director of the department. The city QWL committee serves more or less as a steering committee, and it includes the Mayor, selected members of his cabinet, the President of the union local, and selected board members of the union local.

The QWL Program's Consensus Decision-Making Process

Every QWL committee attempts to follow an informal process of consensus decision-making in which each member voices an opinion on an issue; if dissenting views are not voiced, the committee assumes that a consensus exists on an issue. Normally, therefore, formal votes on issues do not occur; when disagreements do arise, committee members attempt to reach a compromise or suitable settlement through informal discussion. However, even though each QWL committee member has the power to persuade other committee members, including city administrators, these same administrators have the power to veto any suggestion. Such vetos rarely occur without the committee as a whole reaching an understanding of at least the rationale for the refusal. Moreover, the striving for consensus decisions often leads to a reluctance on the part of the worksite manager (and even higher level administrators) to directly veto something the rest of a worksite committee considers worthwhile. For this and other reasons, some issues are not resolved by the worksite committees. In these instances, the committees have recourse to the division-, department-, and city-wide committees. Generally, these committees are approached in successive order, but most issues are addressed at the division level.

However, experiments which would require a change in the city work-rules and/or the union contract are referred to the city-wide committee.

The DR Committee's Membership

At the time this case occurred, members holding fixed positions on the DR committee were ALF (the plant manager), BOB (the assistant plant manager), VRG (the shop steward for the union local), and DEN (a designated member of the union). The eight elected members included the following actors:

Name	Work Area	Status
ARP	laboratory	supervisor II
BIL	plant maintenance	electrician
BIM	plant maintenance	stockroom clerk
CLY	ground maintenance	supervisor II
DIK	ground maintenance	supervisor I
GEN	plant maintenance	worker
HRB	laboratory	chemist
RPH	plant maintenance	supervisor II

Narrative

For over three and 1/2 years the DR committee discussed a flextime schedule at its worksite, but in the course of only one meeting it decided to disband the subcommittee which was investigating the flextime schedule. The chair of the flextime subcommittee (VRG) immediately challenged this decision at a division level QWL meeting. He argued that some members had not had a chance to openly voice their opinions at the meeting, and he requested that the division-level committee order the DR committee to reconsider their decision. During the following meeting, the DR committee readdressed the issue of flextime and reaffirmed its original decision. To understand the motivation for the DR committee's actions, the sequence of events that led to the committee's disbanding of the flextime subcommittee are examined. A timeline

of events (Table 1) reveals 18 events (committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, and fact finding missions) in which flextime was discussed and/or actions were taken.[1]

July 1979 DR Committee Meeting

VRG initiated discussion of flextime as well as a compressed work week in July, 1979. According to the facilitator at that point (A), VRG was motivated more out of self-interest than as a representative of the plant employees (which was his position on the committee until 1981). Nevertheless, the committee surveyed employee interest in both a flextime and compressed work week (4 day week with 10 hour days) schedule.

August 1979 DR Committee Meeting

During the August meeting, the survey results were reported: while there was interest in a flextime schedule, greater interest was shown for the compressed work week schedule. Notes made by the temporary facilitator at this meeting indicate that the committee was about evenly split in support of flextime, while about 2/3 of the members supported a compressed work week schedule. Moreover, two of the three supervisors who would be affected by a compressed work week were willing to help draw up a proposal.

September 1979 DR Committee Meeting

However, during the last meeting in September the committee dropped the compressed work week proposal because of a "change of heart" among employees; The committee probably was also influenced by the fact that another division-level QWL committee had turned down a compressed work week proposal from a worksite committee. At this same meeting, further discussion of flextime was tabled until more information could be gathered based on the success or failure of a flextime schedule at another plant (MR).

April 1980 DR Committee Meeting

During its second meeting in April 1980, the committee heard an interim

Table 1

Timeline of Events Preceding the Decision to Disband the Flextime Subcommittee

7/12/79	VRG initiates discussion of flextime and a compressed work week.
7/26/79	The DR committee surveys employee interest in flextime and a compressed work week.
8/9/79	The survey results are reported, and a subcommittee is formed to draft a compressed work week proposal.
9/27/79	Influenced by another division-wide committee's denial of a compressed work week proposal, the committee drops their own proposal and tables discussion of flextime.
4/11/80	The DR committee invites PAL (the MR plant manager) to discuss the flextime experiment at the MR plant.
4/23/80	PAL discusses the MR flextime experiment.
7/23/80	Based on a report by a facilitator that the MR plant is having problems with its flextime experiment, the DR committee tables discussion on flextime pending a final report on the MR flextime experiment.
6/3/81	The DR committee forms a subcommittee to investigate flextime with VRG as the chair.
7/1/81	GRY replaces GEN on the flextime subcommittee.
8/11/81	RPH and ARP object to implementing a flextime program in the DR plant.
9/2/81	The DR committee invites the MR committee to discuss flextime.
10/7/81	The DR committee forms a task force (VRG, BIL, DIK, and RPH) to visit the MR plant on a flextime fact-finding mission.
10/22/81	VRG, BIL, and I visit the MR plant; we receive a positive evaluation of the flextime program from supervisors and employees.
11/4/81	VRG and BIL's report on the MR flextime program is tabled pending a supervisory fact-finding mission; many negative opinions about the MR flextime program are voiced.
11/25/81	DIK, RPH, and I visit the MR plant; we receive a negative evaluation of the flextime program from upper level supervisors.
12/2/81	DIK, I, and VRG report on the findings of the flextime task force; discussion of flextime is tabled until a survey on interest in flextime by the DR employees is conducted.
12/15/81	VRG, BIL, and I meet to draft a survey; VRG and BIL desire to educate the DR employees about flextime prior to any survey.
12/29/81	VRG, BIL, and B meet and explore strategies for informing employees about flextime.

report on the flextime program at MR from that plant's manager, PAL. Various committee members later informed me that he attempted to present both the positive and negative aspects of the program.

July 1980 DR Committee Meeting

Based on a report made by a facilitator at a division-level meeting of problems with the MR flextime program, the committee decided to table disussion of flextime at the July meeting until the MR committee issued a final report on their flextime experiment.

June 1981 DR Committee Meeting

External events made the implementation of flextime more attractive to the plant work-force. From mid-1980 through mid-1981 a bridge, used by many employees to get to work, was under construction. The alternate route to the plant added approximately an hour of travel each day for these employees, and a flextime schedule would have alleviated some of the problems caused by the bridge construction. Hence, flextime remained salient within the committee, and in June, 1981 a subcommittee headed by VRG was formed to investigate the feasibility of such a program in the DR plant.

August and September 1981 DR Committee Meetings

The subcommittee broached the topic of flextime during the August meeting, and RPH and ARP (both supervisors) heatedly objected to implementing it in the plant. Much of the discussion at this meeting, and during the meeting in September, focused upon contentions about the flextime program at MR. At my suggestion, the DR committee extended an invitation to the MR committee to discuss their flextime program. The MR committee declined the invitation, but they invited members from the DR committee to visit the MR plant and to see how the flextime program worked.

October 1981 DR Committee Meeting

During the October meeting, DIK and RPH (supervisor representatives) and VRG

and BIL (union representatives) volunteered to visit the MR plant; I was asked to accompany the task force on their fact-finding mission.

October 1981 Task Force Visit to the MR Plant

VRG, BIL, and I visited the MR plant late in October; DIK and RPH were unable to visit the plant with us because of construction they had to oversee. VRG and BIL conducted interviews with 15 people in approximately two hours (8 am to 10 am). Their interview format was open-ended, and VRG asked most of the questions which were directed at various issues that previously had been raised at committee meetings. VRG and BIL interviewed the Supervisor I's (PEK and JIT) and the Supervisor II (JOE) of maintenance as well as the assistant plant manager (JIM). They also talked with the stockroom manager and various maintenance mechanics and laborers. The impressions about the flextime program that VRG and BIL gathered were quite favorable.

November 1981 DR Committee Meeting

During the November meeting, VRG began to report about the flextime task force's findings, but he immediately qualified his remarks by noting that the subcommittee did not have a supervisor present during the MR visit. I interjected that BIL and VRG had gathered a balanced report since they had sampled the opinions of both supervisors and employees. However, ALF (the plant manager) still attempted to reprimand BIL and VRG for gathering information without the DR supervisors being present. DIK defended VRG's actions: Since RPH and he had been needed on a construction project, he had urged BIL and VRG to go.

At this point, the committee agreed to table discussion of the task force's findings until a group of supervisors could visit the MR plant. However, discussion of flextime continued for a good 15 minutes, and VRG and BIL fielded questions from various committee members about the MR flextime operation. Many of these questions were based on the following perceptions:

1. Every worker had a key to the stockroom, and it was a mess;
2. Men coming in early punched in time cards for men coming in later since Supervisor I's were not always present at 6 am; and
3. Men coming in early or staying later than "core time" (8:30 am through 2:30 pm) spent their time "goofing off," e.g., drinking coffee.

VRG and BIL refuted these perceptions with the following explanations:

1. Only Supervisor I's and II's had keys to the stockroom;
2. Since JIM had issued reprimands to the employees punching other employees' time cards, this activity no longer occurred; and
3. Since JIT came in early (6 am) and PEK came in later (7:30-8:30 am), there was always a supervisor present so that men did not goof-off.

Following the meeting, DIK and I made arrangements to visit the MR plant for an early afternoon meeting in late November.

November 1981 Task Force Visit to the MR Plant

In contrast to the earlier visit to MR, the supervisor investigation was both more limited and more in-depth. DIK had told me he would be accompanied by SMT, his immediate supervisor, since RPH and CLY were not interested. However, RPH ended up accompanying us on the visit. We proceeded to JIM's office; JOE and JAY were also there. JIM suggested that, since PAL was at a downtown meeting, we meet in PAL's office because of the plant noise. RPH was the most dominant member during the discussion, followed in harmonic order by JOE, JIM, me, and DIK (JAY, as a lower level supervisor, was excluded from the meeting). RPH immediately set the tone of the meeting by asking JIM for his real feelings about flextime. JIM and JOE cited four problems:

1. Employees goof-off early in the day since they wait for supervisors to arrive before starting work;
2. Employees resent working for more than one immediate supervisor;
3. Only a skeleton crew is left for the late afternoon since most employees

arrive early in the morning (6 am) and leave early in the afternoon (2:30 pm); and

4. A mistrust of employees based on the suspicion that some employees still punch time cards for other employees.

RPH's position throughout the meeting was that "things are near perfect" and "we don't need flextime" since it would "wreck the good thing we have" at the DR plant.

December 1981 DR Committee Meeting

DIK, I, and VRG, respectively, reported on the MR flextime program "fact finding missions" during the December meeting. DIK reported that the flextime program at MR caused at least two problems. First, the crew overlap that occurred in the program (due to men and supervisors coming in anytime between 6:00 and 8:30) produced employee-supervisor conflict: some crew members resented supervision from more than one immediate supervisor. Second, the day-to-day, variable-starting-time flextime schedule resulted in many employees arriving early rather than late in the morning, and it meant that only a skeleton crew was present during the late afternoon.

I supported DIK's report and cited some more specific examples of problems with the flextime program. VRG was left rather undone by our reports. He noted that on the first visit the MR supervisors had positively evaluated the flextime program, but they must not have been willing to say anything negative about the program to non-supervisory personnel. I remarked that VRG and BIL had done an excellent job of surveying a wide variety of opinion, and the MR management team had disclosed different information to RPH and DIK. At this point the committee tabled discussion on flextime until more information about the employee need for flextime was ascertained.

After the meeting I arranged to meet with BIL and VRG during the third week in December to construct a questionnaire to survey employee interest in

flextime.

Mid-December 1981 Flextime Subcommittee Meeting

Neither BIL nor VRG was very eager to survey employee opinion since they believed that employees had too many misconceptions about flextime and needed to be "educated" before their opinion was sampled. Nevertheless, I urged them to construct a questionnaire and fulfill the mission they had been assigned by the committee since it was the most "politically" adept move for them. Unfortunately, I had little time to spend with them (approximately an hour) and not much was accomplished at this meeting.

Late-December 1981 Flextime Subcommittee Meeting

A follow-up meeting, during the last week in December, was held with another facilitator (B) who was also rushed for time; however, he suggested that BIL and VRG could pursue their wish to address the employees about flextime by asking the committee for permission to hold a general meeting or series of smaller meetings.

January 1982 DR Committee Meeting

Flextime was the first item on the agenda for the January, 1982 meeting of the committee. VRG and BIL asked the committee if they and other people could speak to some of the employees about flextime. They proposed a meeting, sometime in the next month, in which the 23 members of the work crew would hear presentations on flextime and other alternative work schedules. After hearing about alternative work schedules, the workers would vote on whether they wished to investigate and/or participate in a flextime program. Since VRG and BIL did not fully delineate this proposal, the committee spent considerable time questioning them about it. In the course of this discussion, at least two counter-proposals were suggested by DIK and other members: (1) postponing or tabling any action on flextime until the MR flextime program is evaluated (I eventually undermined this proposal by noting that the MR experiment had been

evaluated and already was implemented), and (2) surveying the work crews to assess their interest in participating in a flextime program.

The committee was split on the merit of both the survey proposal and the presentation proposal. The members supporting the proposals cited the positive evaluation of the MR flextime program, while the members opposing the proposals emphasized the negative report about the same program. Since I had been present during both task force visits, DIK asked me to voice my opinion about what action the committee should take. I advocated that the committee support BIL and VRG's proposal, and I mentioned that a compressed work week was also something that employees could be informed about. The committee discussed the merits of a compressed work schedule, but again reached no agreement. At this point, DIK suggested that the committee table discussion on the whole topic for six months or so. However, I interjected that the subcommittee had reached its level of frustration and wanted either a go-ahead for some action or to drop the whole thing. GEN immediately made a resolution to disband the subcommittee which was put to voice vote with no further discussion. This resolution was passed by 4 votes "aye"; not a single dissenting vote was cast even though 11 of the 12 committee members were present.

(While the preceding account conveys the content of the January meeting, it does not indicate the emotions that surfaced during the discussion of flextime. For example, BIL expressed negative feelings toward the group as a whole, remarking repeatedly that "we're doing nothing but talking." Other members of the committee who opposed the flextime concept also responded in a negative fashion. Not only did ALF and ARP make negative comments about flextime, but also they also slighted the subcommittee's efforts. VRG, in particular, became the target for personal attacks by ARP and others. DIK's response to these heated exchanges was to propose that discussion be tabled for "six months or more". When I intervened to keep the discussion going, GEN proposed that the

subcommittee be disbanded. The vote on this proposal came as the committee's emotional tension peaked; the vote released this tension as if a taut line were slashed with a knife.)

Following the vote, the committee dispassionately discussed other matters for about 30 minutes. After the meeting I talked with BIL, DEN, and VRG about the flextime vote and expressed my amazement that they had not voiced their opposition to the proposal to disband the subcommittee. I pointed out that their "nay" votes would have been enough to deadlock the committee; then the committee would have reopened discussion on flextime. DEN argued that their abstention was a strong stand since it indicated their refusal to consider the proposal. In contrast, VRG stated that he was "relieved but not satisfied," and BIL simply expressed his anger about the whole matter. VRG then threatened to confront the committee about their unethical behavior: rather than seeking consensus, they forced a vote. In response, BIL said that "they [BIL, VRG, and DEN] didn't stand a chance" on a vote since management representatives outnumbered employee/union representatives. I keyed in on the representation issue and suggested that it be brought up at the next meeting of the committee.

January 1982 Division Level Meeting

To my surprise, VRG not only brought up the vote to disband the flextime subcommittee at the Division Level meeting when making his routine report about the DR QWL meeting, but also accused the committee of unethical behavior for voting on the issue rather than seeking informal consensus. He then advocated that the DR QWL committee vote by secret ballot on the proposal. ALF immediately began to refute VRG's accusations by questioning the accuracy of his statements (for example, VRG said only three people voted; ALF claimed that six people voted). I intervened at this point because I felt VRG was not capable of arguing coherently with ALF in front of the QWL members from throughout the division. My intervention resulted in the division committee

focusing upon my interpretation of the DR QWL meeting. The division committee members stated that they did not feel that VRG's complaint was justified and that his solution (vote by secret ballot) was worse than the original voice vote on the proposal. Grasping from the discussion that these perceptions were based on the assumption that a "voice vote" was another term for "informal consensus," I explained that the way in which the voice vote had been conducted (members simply voted "aye" or "nay" in unison) had seemingly inhibited many members from voicing any opinion. The division committee then directed the DR committee to reconsider the proposal and to reach a decision by openly voicing their opinions on the proposal.

February 1982 DR Committee Meeting

Another facilitator (A) accompanied me during the February committee meeting; he presided over a short discussion of the flextime issue and then directed the group members to sequentially state their support or opposition to disbanding the flex[illegible]bcommittee.[2] The committee was grouped in a circle, and each member spoke for a short amount of time about the proposal and then cast a vote. The resolution was supported by a vote of seven to four, with one abstention. After the vote on the proposal, A emphasized that the committee could still discuss flextime since the committee had decided only to disband the flextime subcommittee.

Analysis

Habermas' Theory of Dialogue

In "What is Universal Pragmatics?," Habermas (1979) argues that dialogue is the basis for social action since all communication that aims at mutual understanding is based upon four claims to truth. These claims underly normal conversations in which participants presuppose that what they have to say is

1. intelligible (or comprehensible), that is, uttered in a language

understandable to all participants;

2. propositionally true, in other words, the existential presuppositions of the content of the utterances are satisfied;
3. sincere (or truthful), that is, the participants' intentions are truthfully expressed, hence, believeable;
4. appropriate (or right), in other words, the participants' utterances conform to a normative background which will support the ongoing relationship between the participants.

Habermas calls the preceding presuppositions, universal validity claims; he notes that each of these truth claims can be redeemed or fulfilled. Importantly, communicative action (dialogue) can continue "undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified" (Habermas, 1979: 3).

According to Habermas (1979: 3), full understanding "terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another". Thus, consensus is based on the mutual recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, sincerity, and rightness.

Underlying this notion of dialogue is Habermas' recognition that all communication has a double structure which simultaneously expresses both a content (information) and a relationship (through which the information is understood). Speech act theory (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969) explicates this double structure: the content of a speech act is its locutionary meaning, and the relational component of a speech act is its illocutionary force. Habermas extends speech act theory by identifying three types of speech acts (constatives, regulatives, and avowals) that correspond to the validity claims of propositional truth, appropriateness, and sincerity. (The claim to intelligibility is immediately redeemable through the very act of speaking.)

Furthermore, any one of the validity claims may be thematized by participants in a conversation:

1. Participants may stress the propositional content of an utterance (by using constative speech acts) and raise the validity claim of propositional truth, thus engaging in an objectivating attitude. An example of a constative act is the utterance, "It is raining." (Note that the performative element of this utterance is implied. An explicit version is "[I hereby declare that] it is raining"; the bracketed portion contains the implied performative element.)
2. Participants may thematize their own intentions (via avowed speech acts) and surface the validity claim of truthfulness, thereby presenting an expressive attitude. Saying "I wouldn't lie to you that it is raining" illustrates an avowal (the phrase "I [hereby declare that I] wouldn't lie to you" contains the performative element of the utterance).
3. Participants may emphasize their interpersonal relationship (by forming regulative speech acts) and evoke the validity claim of rightness, enpresenting an interacting attitude. A regulative act is exemplified by the following utterance: "I warn you that it is raining". (The performative elememt of the utterance is "I [hereby] warn you that".

Whenever a participant thematizes a particular validity claim, he or she makes an implicit promise to show the grounds for such a claim. An unconstrained dialogue (on which consensus is based) relies on the assumption that any of the validity claims that are raised can be redeemed through the process of question and answer. Nevertheless, Habermas recognizes that social action does not normally result in consensus:

> The typical states are in the gray areas in between: on the one hand, incomprehension and misunderstanding, intentional and involuntary untruthfulness, concealed and open discord; and, on the other hand, pre-existing or acheived consensus. (1979: 3)

Figure 1 displays the typology of different forms of social action that Habermas refers to in the preceding quote. Action (or dialogue) refers to the ideal speech situation of pre-existing or achieved consensus. Habermas distinguishes between action and discourse (dialectical dialogue) in the following way.

> In communicative action [i.e., dialogue] it is naively supposed that implicitly raised validity claims can be vindicated (or made immediately plausible by way of question and answer). In discourse, by contrast, the validity claims raised for statements and norms are hypothetically bracketed and thematically examined. As in communicative action, the participants in discourse retain a cooperative attitude. (1979: 209)

Examples of discourse include scientific discussions in which the propositional truth of statements are thematically examined and practical discussions in which the appropriateness of some behavior or line of action is made the focus of the conversation. In the former participants seek to demonstrate or show the grounds for particular propositions, while in the latter case they seek to justify conventions. McCarthy (1978) provides a more extensive discussion of these forms of discourse, and he suggests that even though Habermas apparently does not consider ideological discussions as a form of discourse, such discourse is implied by his logic. It would bracket the claim of sincerity and seek the grounds for particular intentions, i.e., beliefs.

Action oriented to reaching an understanding seeks a common definition of the situation, that is, mutually recognized norms for validity claims; in contrast, consensual action (including dialogue and/or discourse) presupposes such a background consensus. (The ongoing talks directed at limiting the nuclear arms race are examples of action oriented to reaching an understanding.) Strategic elements may color action oriented to reaching an understanding, so long as such strategies are meant to lead to mutually understood grounds for redeeming validity claims: in other words, mutually recognized norms. However, communicative action differs from strategic action

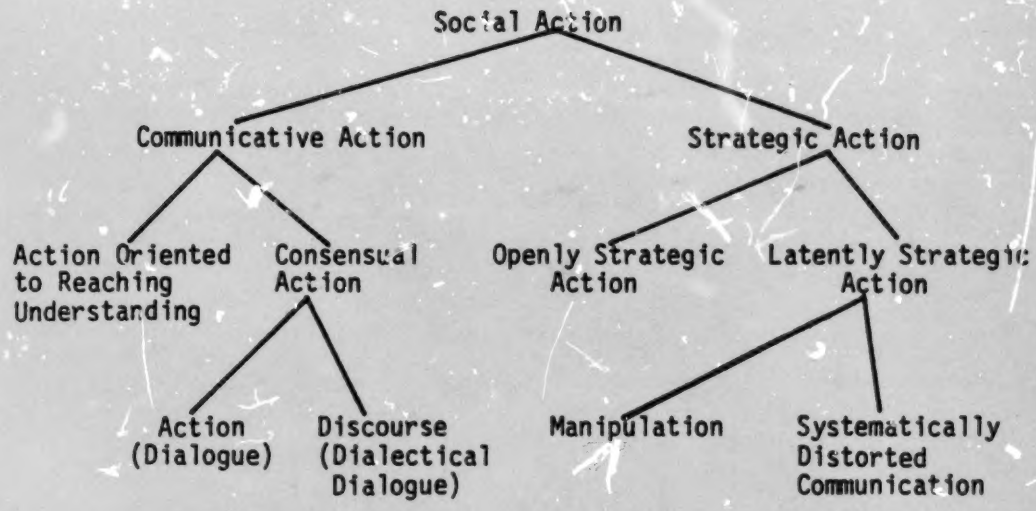

Figure 1. A Typology of Different Forms of Social Action Based on the Validity Claims Raised by Participants

From Jurgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?," p. 209.

precisely because strategic action does not fulfill the validity claim of sincerity. Openly strategic action is exemplified by the well known "posturing" that occurs at the start of formal negotiations; in these cases, the negotiators mutually recognize that their expressed demands are not entirely sincere. Manipulative action, in contrast, occurs when one participant intentionally deceives another participant, causing the deceived to falsely believe that the deceiver is sincere. This form of action is exemplified by the age-old practices of swindlers, the key to their success is gaining the trust of their victims. Lastly, systematically distorted communication occurs when each participant involuntarily violates the basis for consensus by not recognizing the insincerity of his/her actions. While perhaps the best known example of this form of mis-communication is the double-bind (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967), Bion's (1961) work on groups that are governed by unconscious drives (basic assumptions) provides the most relevant example of systematically distorted communication for this case.

Bion's Theory of Basic-Assumptions

Two principle components comprise Bion's theory: (1) the mental aspect of the Work Group in which group members voluntarily participate, and (2) the emotional drives or three basic-assumptions --dependence, pairing, fight/flight--which group members involuntarily share. His theory emphasizes the tension between the mental activities of the Work Group and the basic-assumption "culture" of that same group.

Bion (1961) attributes certain aspects of mental activity to the Work Group and notes that all groups meet to do something. This work requires voluntary cooperation from all group members, and this cooperation is dependent upon the degree of social skill attained by each member. Bion considers the social skill of an individual member to be a product of training, previous experience in groups, and mental development. Using Habermas' terms, the Work Group

mental activity relies on the four truth claims of dialogue.

The "rational" mental activity of the Work Group contrasts with the basic-assumption mental activities which are driven by powerful emotions. These emotionally based mental activities arise from basic-assumptions shared by group members at an unconscious level of awareness:

1. Dependence--group members assume that the group's existence revolves around a leader-figure; the group depends on this leader-figure for all forms of nourishment. The cult that Jim Jones supported exemplifies this basic-assumption.
2. Pairing--group members assume that the group meets in order for group members to become intimate with one another; the group is sustained by a future-oriented ideal. UFO cults that predict salvation by an alien race are examples of this basic- assumption.
3. Fight-Flight--group members assume that the group exists to fight or flee from something; certain street gangs seemingly exemplify this basic-assumption.

Bion (1961) stresses that the basic-assumption mental activity is founded on members having the capacity to instantaneously and involuntarily share the same emotional drive; in calls this capacity, valency.

Four aspects of basic-assumption activity should be stressed. First, Bion utilizes a very abstract notion of leadership and more or less associates it with a specific goal orientation that may be symbolized for the group by a number of different objects. Thus, the "leader" of the basic-assumption group does need not be the work group leader nor even an actual member of the group; rather the history of the group may (especially for dependent groups) serve as a leader-figure. Second, according to Bion (1961), an inherent characteristic of basic-assumption mentality is a lack of awareness of time, and activities that require an awareness of time tend to arouse feelings of persecution among

group members. Third, as Bion (1961) notes, the basic-assumption group is incapable of mental development since the process of development requires an awareness of time. Fourth, the basic-assumption group mentality is incapable of appropriate symbolization and reifies symbols. Bion (1961) explicates this point by noting that the member in a basic-assumption group does not identify with or equate him/herself with the symbols of dependence, pairing, or fight-flight; rather, he or she is those basic-assumptions.

The problem for every group, according to Bion's theory, is that the Work Group mental activity and only one of the basic-assumption mental activities are always co-present within the group at any particular time. This presents a problem because the group members, under the sway of a particular basic-assumption, are incapable of forming or employing symbols which are fundamental to the mental activity of the Work Group. (Based on Habermas' theory, the basic-assumption mental activity is not capable of utilizing the double structure of communication; in other words, the content and relational components of speech are "fused" under the basic-assumption mental activity.) Since the employment of symbols by the group is relevant only to the Work Group mental activity, Bion (1961) postulates that a group which deploys symbols with any emotionality should be considered as expressing a basic-assumption. Thus, to understand the basic-assumption characterizing the group activity, the manifest content of the symbols should be discarded in favor of either the preverbal significance or emotion underlying the use of the symbols.

Bion's Theory as Applied to the Case

Focusing upon the January 1982 DR committee meeting, several points seem noteworthy. First, the meeting had a strong emotional undercurrent, and many people expressed negative feelings toward either the committee (VRG and BIL) or toward the flextime subcommittee (ALF, ARP and GEN). These negative emotions suggest that the committee was expressing a basic-assumption. Second, the

hostile expressions seemed to follow remarks in which the passage of time was emphasized. This was particularly notable when I attempted to keep discussion open on flextime subsequent to DIK's suggestion that the topic be tabled: GEN immediately moved that the subcommittee be disbanded. These hostile reactions are congruent with Bion's points that (1) an inherent characteristic of basic-assumption mentality is a lack of awareness of time, and (2) activities that require an awareness of time tend to arouse hostile feelings among group members. Third, even though the group had discussed many of the issues previously, it could not build upon at any point of agreement on the subject of flextime; rather, the discussion seemingly went in circles. This last point suggests that the committee was not able to develop its thinking, just as a basic-assumption group is incapable of mental development.

Taking a broader view of the DR committee's discussion of flextime, the numerous instances in which discussion was tabled indicates that the committee was fleeing from making a decision. In other words, the basic-assumption influencing the committee was that of fight-flight. The disagreements that marked the late summer and fall discussions of the committee in 1981 also support this claim and indicate that the committee facilated between fleeing and fighting.

Habermas' Theory as Applied to the Case

The basis for dialogue during the January 1982 DR committee meeting was undermined by the hostility that was expressed toward individuals and the group as a whole. In Habermas' terms, the validity claim of sincerity was not mutually upheld by the committee members. For example, the personal attacks upon VRG by ARP and ALF questioned VRG's truthfulness, while BIL's complaint that the committee was doing nothing but talking questioned the committee's sincerity. This suggests that the committee members were acting strategically rather than attempting to reach a mutual understanding. Furthermore, the

previous discussion of Bion's theory indicates that the committee was engaging in systematically distorted communication. In other words, they were acting strategically without being consciously aware of their behavior.

My conversation with VRG, BIL, and DEN seemed to make them aware of the distortion that occurred when the committee voted to disband the subcommittee. VRG's act of questioning the DR committee's decision at the division-level meeting forced the DR committee to become self-reflective and question the appropriateness of their decision. The February 1982 meeting of the DR committee utilized a "institutionalized" mode of informal discussion to create a more or less ideal situation in which every member felt they could voice an opinion without fear of retribution.

ENDNOTES

[1] I have used minutes to the meetings and conversations with past facilitators and committee members in portraying the events prior to 8/1/81. After that point, I have also utilized both my field (written during meetings) and retrospective (written following a meeting or encounter) notes.

[2] After consulting with other third-party facilitators, I agreed that having another facilitator direct the meeting would enhance my role as a "neutral" third party since I had acted, in part, as an advocate during the previous DR meeting.

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